



Lost in the Right Direction: My Volunteer Experience at Lao Friends Hospital for Children

By Aya Husni Bey

Aya Husni Bey is a Therapeutic Play Practitioner, Holistic Counsellor, and is currently completing a Transpersonal Arts in Therapy Level 7 training at Tobias School of Art and Therapy. She travelled to Luang Prabang in February 2018 to volunteer with Lao Friends Hospital for Children (LFHC) for 4 months. What follows here is her recount of her experience at LFHC which she says only touches on the personal rewards she reaped from her time there. It first appeared in the My Mola travel blog.

Lao Friends Hospital for Children opened in February 2015, on the back of the phenomenal success of Angkor Hospital for Children in neighbouring Cambodia. Both were founded by Kenro Izu, a noted Japanese photographer who was distressed by the ill-health and lack of medical care which he witnessed among Cambodian children in the early 1990s.

Why a photographer should have the nous to found a world-beating hospital is unknown, but he did, and the process is being repeated in Laos, a land where about 64 children in every thousand will not live to see their fifth birthday.

By treating preventable illnesses, such as malaria, pneumonia and diarrhoea, LFHC is denting that horrible statistic, and showing how it might soon be in the dustbin of history. Naturally, there is an emphasis on education, but this facility tackles the sophisticated, pricey stuff too: ER, surgery, radiology, diagnostic imaging, laboratory, thalassemia clinic, childlife & family support, outreach, pharmacy and neonatal facility. This latter is a lifesaver every day.

Professionals with skills they could sell anywhere in the world (doctors, nurses, pharmacists, nutritionists, physiotherapists, and childlife specialists) choose to come here from the UK, US, Australia, Japan and other countries. This is a job that may put you out of pocket. I know, I have just done four months in LFHC offering my therapeutic art and play counselling support as a member of the childlife and family specialist support unit. It is the best money I ever spent.

I say this selfishly, because I had the time of my life – and I am well-travelled. Money and career are out of the equation; everyone is here because this is a fantastic place where you get to exercise your skills to the utmost, hopefully do some good (not just tick a box on the CV for NGO advancement!) and stand in awe of what can be achieved with a wise will.

Of course, the people make the place. In backpacker circles, it is a not-very-well-kept secret that quiet Laos, seemingly a bit-part player in the Twentieth Century dramas of SE Asia, is the land waiting to seduce you, and hold you. Landlocked by five broadly more noted countries, Laos has a reclusive image, but right from when you arrive at LFHC, this seems like one of the most open and accessible cultures on Earth.

Volunteers usually sign up for three months to a year, and just about every last one of them leaves with a heavy heart; tears are not rare. Some avoid this pain by not leaving, and find ways to stay on.

The Lao staff adopt you without reservation, not just for the obvious social drinks, but also for river picnics, meals out, night clubs, Laotian synchronized dances, weddings, trips to the local pottery villages and community activities such as cutting bamboo for bamboo soup during the rainy season. We all leave knowing we are not going home in general to people whose humility, spirituality and kindness could ever compare with what has been experienced at LFHC.

I embraced the opportunity to find peace of mind while being immersed in the numinous space generated by the monks at the temple during evening meditations; this, and the beauty of the surrounding environment offered me an unwavering sense of awe that never left, and always felt like nourishment for my senses. This helped me to reenergise, and supported me through more challenging times.

Working in a hospital, and inevitably dealing with death, it was interesting to learn that traditional Khmu graveyards are split into sections; one for natural deaths, one for accidental deaths, one for children and a fourth for those who died away from home. This was important knowledge to have when seeking understanding for why families might wish to take their children home sooner than doctors recommended. I had read

Anne Fadiman's touching and thought-provoking book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. This is a cautionary tale of well-intentioned and highly intelligent western medicine men presuming they are entirely objective, and therefore not getting their heads round an alternative and valid view of life. It can be tricky, but offence is avoidable – and fascination is not.

Naturally, it is personal experiences which bond a place to your heart and everyone at LFHC has a tale or two to tell. One of my favourites was the remarkable recovery of a six-year-old boy who fell from a tree and seemed to have no chance of surviving. His mother with unwavering strength and loving commitment stayed by her son's side; day and night.

He had control over his right arm only and was paralysed on his left side. He had to be fed through a tube, which he didn't like at all. He managed to pull out the tube using his right arm. With time he began to swallow, and eventually came to sitting in an upright position. I got to work with this amazing boy. Eventually he was able to sit in a wheel chair, and I would take him out on little trips for a change of scene, to expand his perception of space, and help reactivate his memory. He was eventually able to turn his head left, or right, and hold it straight forward to indicate which route he wished to explore. He began to try his right hand at drawing and painting, which requires highly concentrated movements and with the help and support of all the team; he got there, we were all so inspired. He began writing the alphabet and then his name. After three months of miracles, this adorable boy said, 'bye bye', waved his left arm, and walked off home.



Of course, the human body and spirit can be wonderfully unpredictable anywhere, but it seemed right and fitting to me that such an utterly confounding, joyful recovery would occur in this magical, spiritual setting.

If you are interested in volunteering with Lao Friends Hospital for Children as a Doctor, Nurse, Childlife Specialist, Pharmacist, Physiotherapist, please visit their website at the link below. Doctors, nurses and pharmacists are particularly in high demand at this time. <https://fwab.org/hospitalvolunteers>